

Story 1034 1979--Transcript of Narrator: Mehmet Balcı, 62
 tape made by Dr.
 Mehmet Yalvaç)

Location: Vezirhan village,
 attached to city
 of Bilecik, Prov-
 ince of Bilecik

Date: 1979

Collected by Dr. Mehmet Yalvaç

Funeral Fiasco in an Infidel¹ Village

In an infidel village near here there was an old priest who had served in the church² for many years. When at last he died, the village remained without a priest for a short while. Among themselves the villagers discussed this situation. "It is time that we hire another priest," they said, "but this time let us hire a younger man." This they did, and the new, young priest was placed in charge of the church.

A few days after he arrived, a member of the Greek³ congregation died. It had been traditional in that village for the family to take the body of the dead person to the

¹The word infidel in Turkish folktales refers to any religion other than Islam.

²The church here is probably Greek Orthodox. The only other large Christian community that lived in Turkey was Armenian, and as Note 3 below indicates, the community here is not Armenian but Greek.

³Yunan means Greek, and Yunanistan is Greece. The word used here is Rum, which literally refers to Rome. The Roman Empire that the Turks encountered when they entered Asia Minor, however, was the Eastern Roman Empire, the Byzantine Roman Empire--far more Greek than Roman.

Story 1034

church to be prayed over by the priest before the funeral. When the body arrived there, the priest and one of his assistants would pick up the body, one lifting it at the foot end and one lifting it at the head end, and place it at the proper place within the church. The mourners were then sent away, and the priest alone would pray at great length over the dead person. When his prayers were completed, the priest would call the mourners to come back and take the body away.

But the new priest who had just arrived did not care to provide this service for the dead. As a result, the villagers lodged a complaint with the muhtar⁴ against this new priest. The muhtar called a meeting of all the villagers and asked them, "How do you know that the priest does not pray over the body after it has been delivered to the church?"

The villagers answered, "This priest does not give the dead body the kind of attention that the old priest did. He gives it no time at all but sends it back out of the church just a few minutes after it has arrived."

The muhtar discussed this at length with the villagers. It was agreed that before they could take any action against

⁴Village head man, an elected official.

Story 1034

the priest, they needed eyewitness evidence of exactly what happened after a body was delivered to him in the church. "Someone must pretend to be dead," they said "Then we shall deliver him to the priest, and the supposedly dead man can observe exactly what happens and report that to us."

At first no one was willing to volunteer to serve as a supposedly dead man. Then the village cowherd⁵ agreed to do this if an additional measure of flour from the mill were added to his next pay. The muhtar said to the cowherd, "In the morning you will 'die. We shall announce your 'death' to the villagers."

On the following morning they placed the still-living cowherd in the coffin⁶ as if he were a corpse. They then informed the priest that so-and-so, the cowherd, had died. The body was then taken to the church, placed inside at

⁵Villagers often have a cow or two apiece and usually several sheep and/or goats. This livestock is taken to the pasture daily and returned each evening. Inasmuch as Turkish pastures are very rarely fenced, the full-time services of a herdsman are used to keep the animals from being lost or preyed upon.

⁶Turkish Moslems are not usually buried in coffins but are placed directly into the ground in their shrouds. There is, however, a community coffin (known as "the four-armed one") used to transport the corpse to the mosque and then later to the cemetery. Since the deceased here is Christian he could well have a private burial coffin, but there is nothing to indicate this.

Story 1034

the proper place, and left there attended only by priest. After everyone else had departed, the young priest placed a chair near the corpse, sat down in it, and lighted a cigarette.

The cowherd had been directed to observe closely everything that the priest did. After the cigarette had been lighted, the herdsman turned his head slightly so that he could see whether or not the priest was praying. Seeing this slight movement of the cowherd, the priest concluded that he must be reviving. Throwing the cigarette from his mouth and taking off his robe, the priest grabbed the cowherd by the throat in order to strangle him. After a struggle that lasted half an hour, the cowherd was really dead.

The priest was drenched with sweat from his exertions, and he was very annoyed. Calling the villagers, who were outside the church ready to take the "corpse" away, he let them know just how offended he was. He said, "Listen to me, you pimps! Don't you ever dare to bring here to me again a corpse that is half dead and half alive!"

Inasmuch as the cowherd was now actually dead, the muhtar and his fellow villagers had no choice but to provide for his children.